

The Book of Marvels  
*Imagining the  
Medieval World*

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**Content Advisory:** Some of the medieval texts and images in this exhibition present demeaning views of religions, peoples, and customs that may be offensive to some viewers.

# The Book of Marvels: Imagining the Medieval World

Medieval writings about the world were often based more on established traditions than direct observation. A fascinating example is the *Book of the Marvels of the World*. Written in France by an unknown author, this fifteenth-century illustrated text vividly depicts the remarkable inhabitants, customs, and natural phenomena of fifty-six regions around the globe, presented alphabetically from Africa to Ululande (Scandinavia). Intended both to instruct and to entertain, such accounts of “marvels” were a primary way that premodern peoples across many cultures learned about distant lands. Such stories, however, were not neutral. In Europe they reinforced deeply rooted notions of civility, superiority, beauty, and behavior, shaping perceptions of other cultures in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Ultimately, as global travel, trade, and colonialism expanded, these medieval expectations and assumptions informed real-world encounters, often with violent results.

Bringing together two of the four surviving manuscripts of the *Book of Marvels*, as well as related works from European, Persian, and Ottoman traditions, this exhibition examines medieval conceptions—and misconceptions—of a global world.

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There are many great marvels and diverse things that may be unbelievable to those who have not otherwise seen and read these stories.

Book of the Marvels of the World

## THE BOOK OF MARVELS

The *Book of Marvels* describes Arabia as hot and arid but abundant in spices and precious gems, which are cut from the stomachs of dragons like pearls harvested from oysters. Other legendary creatures from the region include the “noble” phoenix, born from ashes, and birds whose nests are made of cinnamon, which is eagerly harvested by merchants. The locals are said to lack “proper habitation,” living instead in tents that can be rolled up and moved as needed.

Combining these details into one composition, the artist also depicted the people of Arabia, whose physical traits are not described in the text. He drew instead upon common medieval stereotypes, characterizing them as foreign through their clothing (particularly their headgear), long beards, and curved swords. Named after one of his masterpieces, preserved today in Geneva, this unidentified artist worked for the highest levels of French society—particularly Duke René of Anjou (1409–1480), for whom this copy of the *Book of Marvels* was likely made.

***Book of the Marvels of the World*, in French  
Illuminated by the Master of the Geneva Boccaccio  
France, Angers, ca. 1460  
Morgan Library & Museum, MS M.461  
Purchased by J. Pierpont Morgan, 1911**

## THE BOOK OF MARVELS

Throughout the *Book of Marvels*, the farther one ventures from Europe, the more fantastic the reports become. The section on Traponee (Sri Lanka), for instance, mentions a bird that helps lost sailors find land, and a group of people who elect only childless leaders (to avoid dynasties). The accompanying illustration does not depict these stories, focusing instead on what is perhaps the text's most extraordinary detail: the region's massive snails. These creatures are so large that locals use their shells as homes and "hunt them in the same way [Europeans] hunt wild game." The image at left, representing Thrace, similarly subverts European norms: it shows "barbarians" who kill people indiscriminately, mourn the birth of children, and dance at funerals.

***Book of the Marvels of the World*, in French**

**Illuminated by the Master of the Geneva Boccaccio**

**France, Angers, ca. 1460–65**

**J. Paul Getty Museum, MS 124**

**Purchased, 2022**



## STUDYING THE WORLD

With Pliny's *Natural History* as a model, Bartholomew of England compiled one of the most popular encyclopedias of the entire Middle Ages. Intended as a comprehensive guide to all knowledge, it has nineteen thematic chapters (or "books") that are organized hierarchically, treating divine and celestial subjects first, then humans (including the body and its ailments), followed by several books on the natural world. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, this text was especially popular among aristocrats, who commissioned lavishly illuminated copies with miniatures marking the beginning of each book. Reflecting this elite audience, the scene introducing book 8 ("On the World") depicts a scholar conversing with a king and his entourage while pointing to a representation of the world divided into climatic zones.

**Bartholomew of England (d. 1272)**

***On the Properties of Things*, in French**

**Illuminated by an associate of the Boethius Master**

**France, Paris, ca. 1410**

**Morgan Library & Museum, MS M.537**

**Purchased by J. Pierpont Morgan, 1912**

## STUDYING THE WORLD

Several stories in the *Book of Marvels* reflect an interest in merchants, trade, and luxury goods. Such accounts often focus on the difficulties and dangers of acquiring precious materials such as gems or spices in faraway lands. A popular example relates to the origins of cinnamon, believed to come from the nests of the mythical cinnamologus birds of Arabia. Frequently illustrated in medieval bestiaries (books of beasts), these birds roost in trees of such great height that merchants cannot climb them. Instead, they fling lead balls at the nests to dislodge twigs of the coveted spice. The corresponding scene from the *Book of Marvels* adapts the story to show local merchants using long hooks to pry out pieces of cinnamon from the nests.

**Worksop Bestiary, in Latin**

**England, Lincoln (?), ca. 1185**

**Morgan Library & Museum, MS M.81**

**Purchased by J. Pierpont Morgan, 1902**



Detail of Arabia from the *Book of Marvels*,  
Morgan Library & Museum, MS M.461.

## STUDYING THE WORLD

This herbal, or book of plants, features several scenes that depict how rare metals and other materials are sourced from the earth. At left, workers in fanciful garb extract gold and quicksilver (mercury) from a mountainside in an idealized, pristine wilderness—rather than a quarry. Intended more to captivate the imagination of their medieval audiences than to convey factual information, such images emphasized how precious materials and luxury goods are by their very nature marvels of the world. The plants at right are mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*) and tansy (*Tanacetum vulgare*).

**Herbal (*Compendium salernitanum*), in Latin**

**Italy, Venice, ca. 1350–75**

**Morgan Library & Museum, MS M.873**

**Purchased, 1955**

## **STUDYING THE WORLD**

Unlike modern maps, which are commonly oriented north, medieval European maps are oriented toward the east. Thus Asia occupies the upper half of this map, with Europe at lower left and Africa at lower right, separated by the Mediterranean Sea running down the center. The ocean encircling the world is filled with ships, sea creatures, and schematic representations of islands in yellow. Inscriptions describe marvels including the Amazons (mythic female warriors), the phoenix bird, and the precious gems and spices of India and Arabia. The label for the mysterious region at the rightmost (southernmost) edge describes the legendary Antipodeans, people believed to live on the other side of the world.

**Beatus of Liébana (ca. 730–800)**

***Commentary on the Apocalypse* (“Las Huelgas Beatus”),  
in Latin**

**Spain, Toledo, 1220**

**Morgan Library & Museum, MS M.429**

**Purchased by J. Pierpont Morgan, 1910**



Explore this map further by visiting [themorgan.org/M429](https://themorgan.org/M429) or scanning this QR code.

## STUDYING THE WORLD

The text accompanying this image of China describes a culture where men and women bathe together openly and use branches to dry off. It also explains that, while China is known for silk production, foreign traders will not set foot there because the native language is “unlike any other.” In the miniature, a man grabs a branch while staring at a nude woman reclining on a bed of leaves. Their tense encounter conveys how morally questionable this custom would have appeared to European audiences. At right, a local man conducts business with foreign merchants, who stay on their ship. The *Book of Marvels* features a similar scene but ascribes the difficulty of trading with Chinese people to their shyness, rather than a linguistic barrier.

**Vincent of Beauvais (ca. 1190–1264)**

***Mirror of History*, in French**

**Belgium, Ghent, ca. 1475**

**J. Paul Getty Museum,**

**MS Ludwig XIII 5, vol. 1**

**Purchased, 1983**





Detail of China, from the *Book of Marvels*, Morgan Library & Museum, MS M.461.



## **STUDYING THE WORLD**

In the miniature at right, Persian merchants make the perilous journey through the land of Gog and Magog en route to China. While variously described by multiple sources, including the Bible and the Qur'an, the land's mythical people were generally characterized as primitive, immoral, and dangerous. According to legend, Alexander the Great built a wall to keep them separated from civilized people. Here, hiding behind a mountain, they appear nude with unkempt hair. At left are the mythical people of Nasnas, who are likewise depicted negatively as uncivilized. According to the text, they spend their time hunting and making love.

**Shahmardan ibn Abi**

**al-Khayr (eleventh century CE)**

***Ala-i's Book of Pleasures (Nuzhatnama-i Ala-i)*, in Persian  
Iran, Shiraz, 1526**

**The New York Public Library, Spencer Collection, Pers. MS 50**

## **A WORLD FULL OF MARVELS**

Written for an elite, urban audience increasingly unable to read Latin, *The Book of Nature* popularized the medieval encyclopedic tradition in German-speaking lands. Its eighth and final book describes marvelous springs and wondrous peoples “from the East.” The accompanying woodcut depicts a spring that helps infertile women bear children and another that ignites torches (upper right). The legendary people depicted include the single-footed Sciapods, the headless Blemmyes, the dog-headed Cynocephali, bearded women, and the single-eyed cyclops. As in most medieval European sources, these people are said to live in Asia. Issued in six printed editions before 1500, this immensely popular work represents a milestone in the development of the German language and its use in scientific contexts.

**Konrad von Megenberg (1309–1374)**

***The Book of Nature*, in German**

**Augsburg: Johann Bämler, 1475**

**Morgan Library & Museum, PML 136**

**Purchased by J. Pierpont Morgan, before 1906**

## **A WORLD FULL OF MARVELS**

This profusely illustrated chronicle presents a universal history of the world beginning with Creation (according to Genesis) and ending with events related to King Henry II of England (1133–1189). Interspersed with important episodes from the Bible and ancient and medieval history are entries on marvels, legends, and portents. At left, the text reports the story of conjoined twins “born in the East,” repeated in several medieval sources. Emphasizing each twin’s independent nature, the accompanying image shows one boy sleeping while the other remains awake. Often considered divine omens, children born with congenital disorders increasingly became the subject of inhumane spectacles in the later Middle Ages. The image on the facing page depicts the legendary baptism of Emperor Constantine the Great (d. 337) by Pope Sylvester I (d. 335).

***Abridged Divine Histories*, in French**

**France, Amiens, ca. 1300**

**Morgan Library & Museum, MS M.751**

**Purchased, 1929**

## **A WORLD FULL OF MARVELS**

Among the earliest printed European maps, this sole-surviving copy of a single-sheet woodcut presents a vision of the world much like that of the *Book of Marvels*. With the Garden of Eden at top and Jerusalem at center, its basic composition derives from medieval encyclopedias. Unusually, the map gives little attention to Europe (lower left), which contains few labeled entries compared to the many dozens in Asia and Africa.

The map is full of legendary peoples and wonders, including cannibals, sun worshippers, “pygmies” battling cranes, and the land of Gog and Magog. The islands near India (upper right) are rich in marvels compared to the those at lower right, which are said to be barren because of the extreme heat of the sun.

**Hanns Rüst**

***Map of the World*, in German**

**Germany, Augsburg, ca. 1480**

**Morgan Library & Museum, PML 19921**

**Purchased by J. Pierpont Morgan, 1912**



Explore this map further by visiting [themorgan.org/PML19921](https://themorgan.org/PML19921) or scanning this QR code.

## **A WORLD FULL OF MARVELS**

Since antiquity, the natural baths along the Gulf of Pozzuoli, west of Naples, have been celebrated for their medicinal value. The *Book of Marvels* includes the baths in the section on Campania (Italy), attributing their restorative powers to the ancient Roman poet Virgil, who in the Middle Ages was believed to be a magician. In contrast, Peter of Eboli's poem draws on local traditions as well as inscriptions adorning the ancient buildings themselves to describe the curative properties of thirty-five different baths, each represented by a full-page miniature. Shown here is the bath *Tritura*. In the spectacular fresco in the vault above the bathers, the nude figures point to the various ailments cured by the waters.

**Peter of Eboli (act. 1196–1220)**

***Baths of Pozzuoli*, in Latin**

**Southern Italy, ca. 1400**

**Morgan Library & Museum, MS G.74**

**Gift of the Trustees of the William S. Glazier Collection, 1984**

## **A WORLD FULL OF MARVELS**

Commissioned by Sultan Murad III for his daughter Aysha Sultan, this sumptuous manuscript contains treatises on astrology, marvels of the world, demonology, and divination. Drawing on the long tradition of books of wonders in Arabic and Persian literature, the section on marvels includes legendary tales of Alexander the Great and Sinbad, accounts of supernatural beings and mythical creatures, and descriptions of extraordinary buildings and other man-made spectacles. At right is the Lighthouse of Alexandria, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. At left is a Byzantine church inhabited by Christian monks praying to a golden idol in the shape of a horned demon.

The marvel here is not just the magnificent architecture but also the shocking (and fictitious) religious practices of another culture—in this instance, those of orthodox Christians.

***Book of Felicity*, in Ottoman Turkish**

**Illuminated in the workshop of Nakkaş Osman**

**Turkey, Istanbul, ca. 1582**

**Morgan Library & Museum, MS M.788**

**Purchased, 1935**

## **TRAVELING THE WORLD**

The ever-popular legends of Alexander the Great describe the ancient Macedonian king encountering cultures around the world. Prior to meeting the Brahmans of India, Alexander exchanged letters with their king, Dindimus, asking about their customs. Dindimus explained that Brahmans live a life of purity and simplicity, without laws, buildings, or even clothing. They eat only fruit, and no one is richer or poorer than the others. This illustration depicts one of Alexander's messengers handing a letter to Dindimus, who reclines nude and carefree under the trees they use for shelter. The other messenger looks in astonishment at a nude family: the father reaches for fruit while the mother and child converse nearby. By highlighting these aspects, the image invites its medieval viewers to imagine a society in stark contrast to European notions of propriety.

**Johannes Hartlieb (1410–1468)**

***The History of Alexander the Great*, in German**

**Germany, Augsburg, ca. 1460**

**Morgan Library & Museum, MS M.782**

**Purchased, 1934**



## **TRAVELING THE WORLD**

In Nizami's version of the legend of Alexander the Great, the Macedonian king and his men enter the Land of Darkness (at the northern edge of the world) in search of the Fountain of Life. Khizr and Ilyas (Elijah) use a glowing jewel to find the spring flowing from a mountain. When they stop to eat at the water's edge, a piece of salted fish falls into the pool and miraculously returns to life. After drinking from the water, they become immortal prophets and decide against revealing the spring's location to Alexander. Here, the painter evokes the darkness surrounding the mountain and uses silver (now oxidized) for the lustrous waters and gold for the prophets' halos. The Fountain of Life is a legend shared by many traditions. The *Book of Marvels* locates it in Terrestrial Paradise, near India.

**Nizami (d. 1209)**

***The Quintet (Khamsah)*, in Persian**

**Illuminated by Siyavush Beg**

**Iran, Qazvin, 1549–51**

**Morgan Library & Museum, MS M.836**

**Gift of the Estate of Belle da Costa Greene, 1950**

## TRAVELING THE WORLD

Based on the pilgrimage account of Burchard of Mount Sion, a thirteenth-century friar who spent years traversing the Holy Land, this map is oriented toward the east. Damascus appears at left, the Dead Sea at upper right, and the Mediterranean flows along the bottom. Mountain ranges are marked in brown, and bodies of water in green. Arrayed along a grid are schematic renderings of important towns and biblical sites, with red lines marking the lands of Israel's twelve tribes, and a red cross, right of center, designating Jerusalem. Far from being accurate in the modern sense, the map was made to aid the imagination of medieval Europeans unable to make the arduous journey to the Holy Land on their own.

***Map of the Holy Land, in Latin***

**Italy, Venice (?), ca. 1300**

**Morgan Library & Museum, MS M.877**

**Purchased as a gift of the Fellows of the Pierpont Morgan Library with the assistance of Mrs. Louis M. Rabinowitz and Mrs. Lester A. Le Wars, 1956**



Explore this map further by visiting [themorgan.org/M877](https://themorgan.org/M877) or scanning this QR code.

## **TRAVELING THE WORLD**

Referring to itself as a “book of marvels,” this rare illuminated copy of Marco Polo’s travelogues features miniatures depicting Kublai Khan, his Mongol court, and other Asian peoples. The passage at right describes the province of Charchan (present-day Qiemo in China’s Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region), along the Silk Road. According to the text, the locals are “worshippers of Muhammad,” which the French artist interpreted by showing three turbaned men praying before the statue of a nude figure—a scene understood by medieval Christians to represent idolatry. Repeated in several of the manuscript’s illustrations, the accusation of idol worship reflects a common motif in travel writing that says more about the prejudices of medieval Christians than the actual religious practices of their Muslim counterparts.

**Marco Polo (1254–1324)**

***The Book of Marvels of Great Asia and of India the Greater and Lesser*, in French**

**Illuminated by the Master of the Berry Apocalypse**

**France, Paris, ca. 1410**

**Morgan Library & Museum, MS M.723**

**Purchased, 1927**

## **TRAVELING THE WORLD**

Despite claiming to have traversed the world for thirty-four years, John Mandeville was likely just as fictitious as the famous travel account attributed to him, which is essentially a pastiche of medieval lore. Nevertheless, this text was wildly popular, surviving in more than three hundred manuscripts and many printed editions—thirty were issued before 1500. A common approach to illustrating the text was to depict a “representative” pair of figures from each region. Shown here are the people of Chaldea (present-day Iraq), whose men are renowned for their beauty and fashions, while the women are unsightly and horrendously dressed. By reversing typical European gender expectations, the image emphasized the Chaldeans’ foreignness and difference.

**John Mandeville**

***Travels*, in German**

**Germany, 1459**

**The New York Public Library, Spencer Collection, MS 37**

## **THE LEGACY OF MEDIEVAL MARVELS**

When Columbus landed in what is now known as the Caribbean, he believed that he had discovered a direct route to Asia. Relying on medieval sources, such as the texts of Marco Polo and John Mandeville, he and his men expected to find gold, precious gems, spices, and other marvels like the Fountain of Youth. In their search for these treasures, they ruthlessly exploited the local Taíno peoples whom they mistakenly called “Indians.” The woodcuts in the 1493 and 1494 Basel editions of the letter announcing his discovery are the first European depictions of Native Americans. Drawing not on direct observation but rather the medieval tradition of illustrating marvels, this scene presents the people of Hispaniola as stereotypically uncivilized by emphasizing their lack of clothing and habitation, and their confusion about trading.

**Christopher Columbus (1451–1506)**

***On the Islands Recently Discovered in the Indian Ocean,***  
**in Latin**

**Woodcuts by the Master of the Haintz Narr**

**Basel: Johann Bergmann de Olpe, 1494**

**The New York Public Library, Rare Books Division, \*KB 1949**

## **THE LEGACY OF MEDIEVAL MARVELS**

Written nearly a century after the Columbus letter at left, this firsthand account of life in the Caribbean focuses on the region's natural resources, particularly its gold and silver, as well as the Indigenous population's medicinal practices. Following several sections on silver extraction and processing—tasks for which European colonizers exploited Native peoples and enslaved Africans—this entry explains how local men dance and sing around the house of a pregnant woman to ease her pain in labor. In other sections, the author describes in amazement the locals' medicinal use of tobacco and their skills in weaving. Pairing economically motivated accounts with wondrous tales of local customs, manuscripts like this may have helped secure support for further European expeditions to the region.

***Natural History of the Indies*, in French  
Caribbean or France (?), ca. 1586  
Morgan Library & Museum, MA 3900  
Bequest of Clara S. Peck, 1983**

## **THE LEGACY OF MEDIEVAL MARVELS**

Made of delicately incised gilt copper, this globe is among the earliest to incorporate European descriptions of North America's eastern coast, as reported by Giovanni da Verrazzano in his 1524 letter to King Francis I of France. Accordingly, the globe labels the continent "Verrazana." It also names two of its regions, *Bachaliaio* (Newfoundland) and *Terra Laboratoris* (Labrador), as well as the islands of Cuba and Hispaniola. The western coast is labeled *Incognita* (Unknown) and still features the "Sea of Verrazzano," a mythical body of water that Europeans hoped would lead directly to China, the goal of their explorations. J. Pierpont Morgan purchased this globe a year after acquiring a famous manuscript copy of Verrazzano's letter to King Francis, known as the Cèllere Codex, in reference to a previous owner.

**Robert de Bailly**

**Terrestrial globe ("Bailly Globe")**

**France, Dieppe, 1530**

**Morgan Library & Museum, AZ118**

**Purchased by J. Pierpont Morgan, 1912**



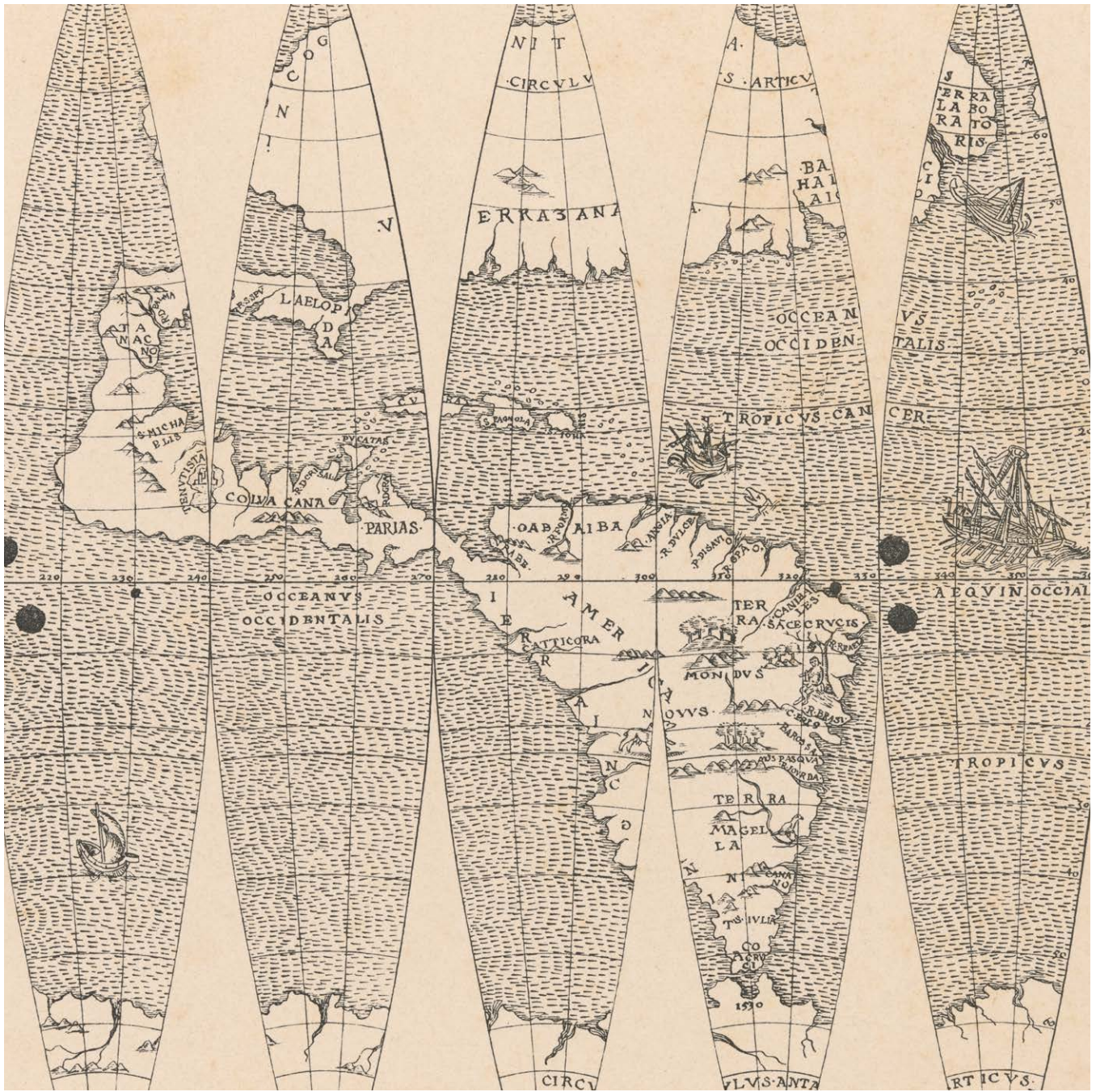


Diagram of the Americas on the Baily Globe.